Intellectual challenges

"I saw that everything depended fundamentally on politics, and that, no people could ever be anything but what the nature of its government made it." Lynn Hunt, quoting Jean Jacques Rousseau, used these words in the opening to her study on the French Revolution to describe the novelty of the situation France in the mid-18th century. When Rousseau wrote them, he was suggesting what would go on to become a central tenet of the French Revolution, that there was a very direct relationship between a government and the people it ruled—that politics was central to the everyday life of all citizens.

Hobbes and Locke

Rousseau was one of a number of important thinkers that were turning their considerable intellects to what they saw as a central question of the 18th century—who should rule? A century before the Bastille fell in Paris, however, two English philosophers were grappling with this very question, arriving at two very different conclusions. Thomas Hobbes and John Locke shared a conviction that the legitimacy of any form of government had to be justified through rational thought and not, as it had in the past, by resort to theology or tradition. It was not enough for a government to claim that its right to rule rested on the will of God or the simple fact that it had always been thus. The proper form of government could be reasoned, according to Hobbes and Locke, and this very reasoning was the foundation of the right to rule.

In the study of history, as in much of life, context is vital to understanding cause and effect. Hobbes developed much of his political thinking during the English Civil War of the 1640s. This period of destruction and instability had a profound effect on Hobbes's view of human nature and consequently what he believed the proper form of government should be. His rather low opinion of human beings and what he saw as a constant competitive struggle for survival in nature led him to the conclusion that a strong absolutist form of government was the best defence against the great beast of civil unrest. In this conception, humans would give up their individual rights to the absolute ruler in return for the stability provided by this ruler. This transaction, according to Hobbes, was a one-time affair. Once people gave up their rights, their fate, for good or ill, was in the hands of the ruler. In practical terms, this meant that citizens had no right to rebel regardless of the actions of the government. For Hobbes, absolutism was not the end in itself, but rather a means to an end—and this end was civil peace and concord.

John Locke, starting from an alternative view of human nature, arrived at a very different conclusion as to the nature of government. While Hobbes believed that humans in a state of nature were in a state of perpetual conflict, Locke saw humans as reasonable and peaceful, naturally inclined to cooperate in the best interests of society.

According to Locke, humans in this state of nature had certain inalienable rights by virtue of the fact that they were human. As a keen proponent of the human capacity to learn, Locke trusted that humans had the capacity for self-government, the primary duty of which was to protect the life, liberty, and property of the governed. The relationship between the government and the governed was one of mutual obligation and responsibility. What would happen should the government fail in this duty? Locke advocated that citizens had the right to change this government, peacefully or otherwise, should it fail to protect their life, liberty or property. They had the right to rebel.

Because of the different conclusions that they each reached, the ideas of Hobbes and Locke were seized upon by opposing sides in a number of political conflicts during their lifetimes and in the years after they died. The language and visions of Locke pervade the founding documents of the United States. The logic, if not the deeper motives and principles, of Hobbes has been invoked to rationalize state power into the 20th and 21st centuries. While they embarked on their enquiry from different premises which, in turn, led them to different conclusions, what they had in common was perhaps more important. Both were convinced that the proper application of human reason could lead to the best form of government without recourse to archaic tradition or arcane theology. Perhaps more importantly, they both conceived of the relationship between the ruler and the ruled as a social contract.
The **contract theory** approach to political philosophy would dominate discussion in the coffee houses and **salons** of Europe for the century leading up to the French Revolution and help structure the essential debates within the Revolution itself.

**Voltaire**

Four years after Locke published his seminal work of political philosophy and democratic ideals, Two Treatises of Government, in 1689, Francois-Marie Arouet, known to history by his pen name, Voltaire, was born. Throughout his life, Voltaire would use his pen to mock and skewer ideas and people he believed contemptible and laud and praise those who espoused and lived his ideas of personal freedom. In many ways, Voltaire was a combination of Hobbes and Locke. He believed, as did Locke, in the human ability to learn and the idea that reason should guide all decisions of state. He shared with Hobbes a very low opinion of humans in their natural state, and their inability in this natural state to govern themselves. It was this lack of faith in the uneducated masses, which confirmed Voltaire as a fervent opponent of indiscriminate democracy. Who should rule, but the educated and able, according to Voltaire. So long as they ruled according to Enlightenment principles—progress, freedom of religion, freedom of speech, freedom of thought, organized and rational policy—Voltaire did not care how much power they had.

It is in his emphasis on reason and freedom wherein Voltaire's political legacy lay. Institutions such as the Church and the Monarchy whose control, according to Voltaire, was based on superstition, tradition, and force, rather than reason, were archaic and deserved to be swept away or at the very least ridiculed. Voltaire wrote volumes criticizing these institutions. Satire, novels, drama, essays, histories were all tools that Voltaire employed in his assault on the enemies of reason.

**Rousseau**

If Voltaire was the intellect of the Revolution, Jean Jacques Rousseau was its heart, and like many matters of the heart his contribution was ambiguous, contradictory and fraught with double meaning. He shared a number of ideas regarding the relationship of the individual to the state with Voltaire and John Locke. He believed that humans, by virtue of being human, were imbued with certain inalienable rights. His later writings were based on contract theory. For Rousseau society was based on a social contract among all citizens. But whereas Locke and Hobbes saw this contract as an agreement between the rulers and the ruled, Rousseau saw it as an agreement between the citizens themselves. This civil society was to be ruled not by kings or governments or bureaucracies but rather by an amorphous concept he called the **General Will**.

The **General Will** was the embodiment of the wishes of the people. While this may seem straightforward, the difficulty came in determining what that general will actually was. While a majority vote may be useful, Rousseau did not think it could be the only, or even the main, gauge. The General Will was more the collective good of the whole society—the common interests that united the people. These community interests were to take precedence over individual interests. This vague conceptualization, though popular among many before the Revolution, was to prove fractious and even deadly as the Revolution moved forward. The prime stumbling block was how exactly to determine the General Will, or, more precisely, who spoke for or knew the General Will. Revolutionaries of all political stripes claimed to understand the General Will more completely than their opponents. This ambiguity has helped Rousseau's ideas live long into the 20th century. While 20th century democrats have claimed the system of majority voting in a modern liberal democracy is the most efficient method of determining the General Will, dictators throughout the century have claimed a special knowledge of the General Will, which uniquely positions them to lead the state. Beyond the General Will, Rousseau's spectre floats through the entire revolutionary period. In commenting on the nationalistic aspirations of the Poles, Rousseau presaged the nationalistic aspirations of the French republic. His words would echo in the speeches of major revolutionaries of all parties. Marie Antoinette was an admirer. Rousseau's philosophies shaped Robespierre's thinking. His tomb was an important pilgrimage. His imprecise political conceptions could be seized upon by any number of very different ideologies precisely because they were imprecise. As historians such as Simon Schama and Lynn Hunt have illustrated, perhaps Rousseau's most important contribution to the French Revolution was that he helped provide a language that all the participants of the Revolution could use to express new ideas and programmes.